



### **Summary from Discussion Group 3: Merit Review Issues**

With regard to scientific peer review in the VA research program, there have been multiple changes initiated over the past year. Many of these changes were initiated as part of an effort to consolidate the review process in central office and make it more consistent across the four research services. In addition, some other changes that have impacted on the scientific review have also been implemented on a trial or pilot basis.

This discussion group was asked to respond to four specific questions regarding merit review, as well as any other related issues they wished to consider.

**Q: “Just-in-Time” Review: How has it impacted on the field? Tell us the pros and the cons of continuing “just-in-time”.**

**Group Response:** The consensus was that, in order for “just in time” to work effectively and efficiently in the field, it is critical that review results (scores) be transmitted to the field expeditiously following review. If scores are not relayed quickly, there is insufficient time for the local reviews to occur prior to funding dates.

**Q: “Productivity” Scoring: Tell us what you think of this concept. Do you think an investigator’s productivity with past funding should or should not be considered during the peer review process? If you think it should be considered, how should it be scored – separately? or as a component of the scientific review? Please be as specific as possible.**

**Group Response:** The group firmly stated that central office should “never ever never ever” use a separate numeric value for “productivity” either as a separate score or as part of the final score, in the review process. In order to achieve the same results, the review panels should place more emphasis on providing commentary on the investigator profile section of the review. As an aside, the group commented on the “life situation” portion of the investigator profile, noting that the intent of this section is unclear.

**Q: How have the new submission dates for merit review proposals affected the field? What about changes in funding dates?**

**Group Response:** Again, the group emphasized that the six-month review cycle is reduced for both the field and central office. In order for this process to be viable for both sides, it is imperative that review scores are transmitted to the field expeditiously.

**Q: At least initially Letters of Intent (LOIs) submitted to Biomedical Laboratory R&D Service (BLR&D) and Clinical Science R&D Service (CSR&D) will be used as placeholders only (in order to better identify reviewers for incoming proposals). Do you think it would be beneficial to investigators for BLR&D and CSR&D to begin reviewing the LOIs and providing feedback to investigators as the other services do? If not, why not?**

**Group Response:** The group consensus was that for LOIs submitted to BLR&D and CSR&D, triage should not be used – there is insufficient information on LOIs on which to judge science. While the group believed that feedback might be useful to investigators, they also believed that the feedback would likely not be useful enough to warrant the administrative burden. They also recognized that triage is not an irrational concept, but it can be a highly emotional activity.

**Additional Comments:** In addition to the issues discussed previously, this discussion group also added the following comments regarding the merit review process.

- ❖ *Summary Statements* – are an extremely important component of the review process as they provide feedback to the investigator and to the station. The group strongly urged that central office staff ensure that the quality of summary statements transmitted to investigators is very high.
- ❖ *Review of clinical and biomedical laboratory studies* – the group supports reviewing these proposals on the basis of the scientific content, rather than the type of research (i.e., bench or clinical).
- ❖ Finally, the group expressed appreciation for Dr. LeRoy Frey who has overseen the review process for Medical Research Service for a number of years.